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Reagan Approves Arms for Saudis But Faces Hard Fight in Congress

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 28 — President Reagan has decided to sell more than \$300 million worth of missiles to Saudi Arabia despite the strong possibility that the sale will be blocked by Israeli supporters in Congress, a senior White House official said today.

The official said the Saudis were concerned about recent successes by Iran in its war with Iraq because Iranian troops had moved close to Kuwait and the Persian Gulf oilfields.

"We're going to ask the Congress for it," the official said of the sale, "on the grounds that the Saudis think they need it. They feel threatened right now with Iran seemingly pushing Iraq back and seizing Iraq territory. They are getting very close to Kuwait, and you know from Kuwait to the oilfields doesn't take that much time."

The official said the arms package included advanced models of the Sidewinder air-to-air missile and the shoulder-held Stinger antiaircraft missile. Harpoon anti-ship missiles may also be included. The exact number of missiles was still being worked on, State Department officials said, but are said to include as many as 1,700 Sidewinders, 800 Stingers, and 100 Harpoon missiles.

May Go to Congress Next Week

The package will probably be submitted to Congress next week, department officials said. Congress will have 50 days to reject the sale by majority votes in both houses. If that happened and President Reagan then vetoed the rejection, it would take a two-thirds vote to overturn his veto.

The senior White House official said the Administration was aware that the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the leading pro-Israeli lobby in Congress, had already begun a campaign against the deal, and that a majority of the Senate was on record as opposing it.

Last month overwhelming opposition from Congress caused the Administration to reluctantly suspend a pending \$1.9 billion military sale to Jordan. Senior State and Defense Department officials have expressed concern that if the Administration cannot follow through on the sale to Saudi Arabia, it would severely damage American credibility with its traditional friends in the Arab world.

The Administration originally planned a year ago to sell Saudi Arabia a much larger arms package, including F-15 jet fighters, M-1 tanks and bomb racks and auxiliary fuel tanks for the F-15's. But because of opposition expressed informally by more than two-thirds of the Senate, the offer was never made. There have since been extensive discussions with the Saudis, and the sale has been reduced to just the missile package, which the Administration will argue is consistent with past arms sales.

Iranian Success a Surprise

The Iranians' breakthrough near Basra, Iraq, came as a surprise to American intelligence analysts, who believed that Iraq was virtually impregnable.

The Saudis have said almost nothing publicly about the sale. Last year Saudi Arabia announced it would buy British Tornado fighters because it could not get more American F-15's to add to the 60 it already had.

Alan Cranston, a California Democrat, is leading the Senate opposition to the Saudi sale. He said that even though the Administration described the Saudis as American allies, they had been "actively and aggressively opposing United States interests and policies in the Middle East."

In an interview, he said the Saudis paid "hush money" to both the Palestine Liberation Organization and to Syria, which undercut United States antiterrorist policy. He said the Saudis failed to support King Hussein of Jordan in his recent peace efforts, and that they continued to snub Egypt. And, he said, the Saudis have taken the lead in trying to impose sanctions on American companies doing business with Israel.

Mr. Cranston, in addition to promising to lead the fight against the missile sale, has also raised the possibility of trying to block the transfer to Saudi Arabia later this summer of Awacs electronic command and surveillance planes.

The planes were sold to Saudi Arabia in 1981, after a bitter contest in Congress, but Mr. Reagan promised that before he sent them to the Saudis in 1986, he would certify that the transfer would contribute to stability in the region and help the atmosphere and prospects for progress toward peace.

Mr. Reagan said he has secured the promise of Senator Richard G. Lugar, the Indiana Republican who is chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, for a hearing on Saudi Arabia next month or in early April.